Note by JR Wright, July 2003 AD: This story is all that remains of Myatt's unpublished novel *Gilbert's Patch*. Unsatisfied with that novel, and especially with what he called its "unnecessary dialogue and long-winded tales of rural toil and *angst*" he decided to recently radically revise it and distill it into its current form.

Myatt has also, more recently (October 2003 AD) changed the ending.

One Connexion:

A Short Story

by

D. W. Myatt

Of all the places Alun ever envisaged living, Sheffield was not one of them. The houses, the roads, the seemingly always present traffic and people were like another world. His adult years had been spent mostly outdoors, in rural English counties and for the past five of those years he had laboured on a farm. Now, every morning when he awoke, at five o'clock or earlier, he yearned for the quiet fields of that farm: Gilbert's Patch, The Croft, Swancase, Cherry Orchard... The field names were old, as he felt himself to be, although he was only fifty-three. Not that many people guessed, for he looked several years younger, his slim frame sinewed from toil and his still outdoor coloured face sometimes betraying a boyish, and sometimes a roguish, charm.

The view from his room was reasonably pleasing for Sheffield, or any such city or town, for the large, old, house stood higher than the newer houses below, and many trees, mostly less than fifty years of age and often Silver Birch, added a little touch of natural green beauty. Today, and for a change this cloudy and rainful Summer, the sky above the houses was blue, covered in only a few places with small, tufted, cumulus clouds. This pleased him, for a while. But even after three months residence, he did not feel at ease among the streets or in the shops as he did indeed look somewhat out of place in such urban surroundings with his rather unkempt ginger beard, his tweed cap, oilskin jacket, moleskin trousers and heavy working boots. He tried to pretend to himself that he really did not care what people thought about him, as he pretended not the notice when people stared at him, but it did not work.

He had only intended to stay a few days at this house of his friend, following the failure of his marriage, the loss of his job and three weeks living in a tent while the causal work of hedge laying on another farm lasted. But the seldom quiet house and its many people - friend, friend's wife, young child, two lodgers and the visits of others every afternoon and evening - had strangely pleased him, and the three days became a week, a month. Two months, then three. He soon discovered the reason why, for at the end of his second week he had said his farewells, and wandered off with his heavy rucksack to journey back to his beloved Shropshire, intent on seeking work. Three days later he was back in Sheffield. But it was not his failure to find work which drew him back; nor even living in a tent; not even the rainy, cold weather. Rather, it was a woman.

His return that day had been strange, for he had spent the morning sitting in the rain, resting his back against the broad trunk of a centuries old oak tree that grew on the edge of a field in the quiet hills of South Shropshire where he had lived for many a year. He loved these hills in a wordless way that he long ago had decided not to dwell upon. For it was not that they were high, like those of Cumbria, or that they were isolated and high, like those of distant Scotland. It was not even that he had been born near them, having only moved to live and work among them at the age of twenty-eight. He just felt, and had always felt, somehow at home among them, as if these hills, these valleys and Cwms, lived and he was part of their living.

The hours of that particular day came and went, and still he did not move even though the rain began to leak through parts of his worn, old waterproof clothing and had for some time trickled down from his rain soaked hat to dampen his collar and neck. In the beginning of his sitting he knew he felt alone as he knew that part of him feared the prospect of remaining alone, bereft of a wife, a family, a home. But he did not then really know why, after hours, he suddenly with a fierce, almost demonic energy, jumped up, gathered up his rucksack and ran, stupidly, dangerously, down from the steep muddied hill to quickly walk along the narrow puddled hedge-enclosed lane toward the road that carried traffic from the one nearby hamlet to the small village beyond. There was no bus from that road to convey him to the nearest town, seven miles distant, and in the pouring rain he trudged, often ankle deep in mud, through fields until, many miles later, he arrived at the small village of clustered stone cottages where he knew a bus was due. He was early, two hours early, and spent a cold, hungry, time waiting, sitting on an old plastic bag beside a hedge. Such was the weather, and the quiet smallness of the place, that no one, and no vehicles, passed by. He was not certain why he waited: all he knew was that he felt compelled to return, and it was only when he arrived back in Sheffield, two buses, three train journeys and well over half a day later, and saw her as she smiling opened the door, that he knew. He had fallen in love with his friend's wife.

Mojca - well over fifteen years younger than he - had once been strange to him; almost quixotic. A mass of black curly hair framed a slim oval face whose dark eyebrows seemed to suit the only slightly lighter eyes. The straight nose, the lips exquisitely curved, the intensity of those eyes, her fulsome breasts and curvaceous body had all combined to affect him in a way he was unprepared for. She had seemed to belong to another world, with her almost eccentric but always stylish, even glamorous, manner of dress; her foreign accent; her artistic endeavours and exhibitions.

But in the days following his return they spent more and more time together, talking of their lives, their hopes, their sadness. And that fateful day when, seated at the table in the large Kitchen, stylishly furnished by her as were all the rooms, she had smiled at him so kindly that he reached across the table to hold her hand. She did not withdraw, and it was if in that moment all the sadness of his strange, sometimes complex life, drained away from him. For he blamed himself for the failure of his own marriage, as he blamed himself for many other things, knowing as he did the suffering, the deaths, that many events of his past - that he himself - had caused. For years he had struggled to change himself. It was not that he wanted to forget the deeds of his past; rather, he often strived to remember them, knowing that through such remembering he would value what was important about life rather as, when working hard on the farm he treasured the free time - breaks, lunch, a restful moment in some field beneath the sky - he more intensely felt the beauty of Nature, the rural landscape he was part of by being there, doing the demanding outdoor work he did.

That evening, as they often had on previous days, they sat talking again after her husband had escaped to his attic study and all her routine chores - cooking, cleaning, child bathed and asleep - had been done. But it was not long before Alun's hope led him to stand beside her, hold her hand and raise her gently to her feet. He embraced her then, and they clung to each other for what seemed a long while, although it was only a few minutes of earthly time. The next day he did the same and they stood, face to face, their noses almost touching, tasting each other's breath for several moments until he kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, and she held onto him for several moments before moving away. The next day they embraced, eagerly,

and kissed like lovers. Once, twice, in the following days, he touched her breasts, and she pressed her body into his and held him tightly.

The day of her husband's departure arrived, due as her husband was to return to work abroad. Her husband said nothing, as Alun said nothing, but both knew how events were unfolding. And that night, the meal over, the now equally shared household chores done, her child asleep, Alun and Mojca became lovers.

But this all seemed so distant, now. For six weeks he been alone in the house while his new lover, her husband and their child, had been away in the land of her birth. She had written once, and once only, writing a few words of love which kept him happy, even joyous in his loneliness. But then the strained, short, telephone calls she made; a stark, obvious, change of attitude, and no explanation. "I am too busy to write," she had said.

So he was left to wonder until he felt he knew. This deeply saddened him, leaving him with the feeling of the humiliation of rejection, for to his new lover he had given everything he possessed: his trust; his hopes; his dreams; the secrets of his past. And she in those passionate months of sharing had pledged her love. So they had talked - hour upon passing hour in that peaceful, warm, relaxing after midnight time when, satiated, they lay together in the subdued light in her room - of a life together, of children.

But now: now in his sadness he would spend an evening sitting in the small but greenful garden, consuming glass after glass of port, as he spent days traveling, often long distances, in search of work. Any work just to fill the hours, to give some purpose, some semblance of meaning, some role, some self-respect, some money to renew his rapidly dwindling savings. And when away he would seek out the nearest Pub and drink pint after pint of beer until both his feelings and his thoughts were still.

Thus he waited as June turned to July for the return of she whom he still hoped was his lover.

He had met her once, twice, in the years previous to the failure of his own marriage. But his visits to his friend had been brief, of hours only, and he occupied with himself. He had thought her beautiful even then, if odd, but she was in those times only a glimpse of some painting encountered briefly on a humid Summer's day when as a young gawkish man thwarted again in love, he had wondered into some unremembered Gallery on his travels and spent an hour idly viewing mostly unimpressive works of Art until that one painting, that one woman's face, held him still, unmoving, unthinking, until his body remembered to breathe again.

"You are the most unusual man I have ever met," she told him, several times, in the first weeks of their love, and he assumed it was a compliment, given her journeys, her artistic friends, her work, her passionate nature.

The hours of his waiting on that last day of his wait were long, stretched by his dread, and he was more unstill than he ever could remember: waiting, listening to music, in the room where she produced her works of art and where they had shared many passionate nights; waiting in the garden, sitting, walking, even lying on the damp grass. Twice he walked fastly and for a long time around the streets near the house, as he sat for hours watching television. He did not care what he watched, only that something, some sounds, some sights, filled his hours. And then, in the late dark of that cool Summer evening, she was there, nervously smiling at him, and drawing away when he rushed to embrace her. He knew then there was no need for words, but she, later, spoke to him nevertheless as her husband, her child, slumbered, replete with her love. "I am sorry..."

For hours afterwards as she herself peacefully slept, he sat outside in the garden. There was no turmoil in him; no anger, and he sat as some injured animal might sit, without thought, waiting for death.

Alun stayed in the house, despite his best intentions. He wanted to leave; to be free; and he desired to stay, to be close to her, hoping that he might somehow persuade her to love him again. Sometimes, she would smile at him as her eyes seemed to betray the care of love; and sometimes - often - she would look at him as a stranger might. He spent his days wandering the streets, sitting in the garden, traveling, occasionally looking for work, while she busied herself with her family, her friends and her artistic endevours. He had no plan of travel in that first difficult week, only to go somewhere, anywhere. It was not that he wished to think, but rather have something to do, some goal, however trivial. Three times he went by train to Windermere to spend a day on ferries as they sailed the Lake, and twice to Whitby where he would sit for an hour or so on a bench overlooking the sea, watching clouds, the distant horizon, or whatever moved around him.

Several times in her house, when his feelings burst forth from him as rain from a thunderful storm-cloud, he moved toward her to hold her in his arms, and only once did she move away. For a few brief moments there was the tightness of a lover's embrace until she severed their closeness. Twice during the days of that first week she explained in detail the reasons for her choice, and twice he sat, quite still, as her words destroyed his hope. He slept for only a few hours each night, and each day his physical tiredness grew. Sleep came only after beer, wine or Port.

But slowly, as the Sun rising on a cool and cloudless Spring day, he began to regain the warmth of strength, and so he would sit in his stuffy room as the humid weather of that late July continued, writings his lists: of what he would do; what he would take; where he might go.

He thought of many places, remembering the years of his wandering youth, as he unpacked and repacked his tent. But it was not the solitary life of a wandering tramp that he desired - perhaps recapturing a part of his past - but rather human company and companionshhip. So it was that he decided to return to Shropshire to seek work and a room in some Pub, keeping and taking only that which he could carry.

It was a strange farewell, from his friend, who knew the reason why; from Mojca who for some minutes seemed unconcerned until a brief sadness became conveyed by her eyes. But she controlled it, and affably bade him farewell, as a friend might.

The humid heat of late July had given way to a rainy, cool August and as he sat in the train that conveyed him he felt a desire to return. Twice he collected his rucksack and went to stand by the door as the train arrived at some Station, and twice he returned to his seat, and by the time of his arrival in Shrewsbury his head ached painfully. It did not take him long to find a suitable oldish Pub with a small room and good beer, and for a few hours he was glad to wander around the familiar streets of central Shrewsbury even in the slight drizzle. Quarry Park, with its greenery, flowers and trees, was unchanged; the wide river Severn was as interesting to watch as he had always found it to be, and he lingered awhile beside it, across from the grounds of Shrewsbury School. He was even almost happy, for a few hours; until the dark of late evening arrived. But several pints of beer dissolved the sadness.

It was the mornings he began to find difficult but he filled them, and his afternoons, as best he could, seeking employment or walking for miles along by the banks of the river, away from the town. And when evening came he would return to his chosen Pub, drink, and watch something on the television that was set high above on the wall beside the Bar. Almost a week later he heard of some work, on a farm near

Malvern. It was not where he wished to be, but he telephoned, and went by train.

Although named Bank Farm, the place was in reality a Nursery where plants and trees were grown. Set on a slight hill between Malvern and Worcester, the farm consisted of several hundred acres mostly beside the river Teme. The soil was good in places, although clayey nearer to the river and the fields still retained a relative smallness, with none being larger than twenty-five acres. For nearly an hundred years the place had been an ordinary, mixed, working Farm until its present owner, seeing an opportunity, decided there was more interest, and money, in growing plants and trees.

Alun arrived at the large yard next to the village Garage, having walked the many miles from Malvern Station. The main road that led to the Farm gave him a sense of disappointment, for it was fair full of traffic joining as it did the town of Worcester with the not very distant city of Hereford, the surroundings fields containing the usual, large, fields of wheat. He arrived toward noon as the Sun emerged from the thin cloud that had covered all of the sky. His sense of disappointment did not lessen as he walked past the old Coach House toward the large sheds where several people worked, loading pots of plants, large and small, onto trolleys for loading onto waiting lorries while loud modern music played. Several mini-tractors, pulling trailers full of plants passed him as he walked toward the old cattle shed.

Inside, John was waiting amid the tractors and machinery. Not quite thirty, John was a tall and very broad man dressed in shorts, shirt, baseball cap and walking boots, his body tanned deeply by the nature of his work, his hands large, rough and strong, his face and manner friendly.

Alun was given the guided tour. The fields where the trees were planted and grown lay below the Nursery as the land sloped gently down toward the river and as soon as he passed by the old gate that separated the two parts of the Farm Alun began to relax. The hedges were tall, with many mature trees, among them Oak and Ash and including - down toward and along the overgrown river's edge, Willow. The fields themselves, between twenty and thirty acres each, contained long rows of Spring planted trees, both ornamental and fruit. The rows, and the spaces between the plants, had been recently weeded, by hand.

There came to him then a deep, silent, peace and he felt happy here, under warm Sun, on the soil, beside the river. He did not care about the lowly money that was offered for the hard work needed, nor the hours of that work; he just wanted to work, to return to this place, and there grew in him then the feeling that at last he belonged somewhere again. And with this feeling, the violent, bloody, murderous remembered images of part of his past that had for the past week betrayed him - especially at night when he would wake after only a few hours sleep, almost desperately longing to lie beside Mojca and feel the warmth of her body - seemed to fade, for an instant at least.

Work was agreed, a day and time to start, and he shook hands with John who gladly gave his permission for Alun to stay, wandering in the fields by the river. So he wandered around them for nearly an hour before sitting then lying on the bank of the river. There were no clouds to obscure the brightness of the Sun and he fell asleep amid the sound of the river, where it narrowed to rush over water-carved rocks, and the sounds of an English Summer: bees, bird-song and breeze as it stirred the leaves and branches of those many trees that grew, old and young, along that greenful river's bank.

He briefly returned to his lodgings in Shropshire to collect his few possessions and it did not seem to matter to him that he began the first day of his work without knowing where he would spend the night. There would be some lodgings, somewhere, nearby.

He was right about lodgings, and the work. His first task that day was to hoe one of the fields that adjoined the river. The hoe he was given was old, its hickory handle, five foot long, slightly worn where the hands of fifty years had held it, its angled blade heavy and a little pitted from use. But it was well-

balanced, and easy to use, in the right hands.

For nearly two months his calm and happiness lasted as he lived in lodgings, in a room of an Inn less than one mile from his work, and as he toiled, almost always by himself, in the fields, hoeing out weeds, or removing the suckers growing on the budded rows of planted trees. His evenings would be spent, straight after work sitting in the Bar of the Inn, drinking, and willing to talk with anyone who happened to be there. This, as his destiny willed, was more often than not the Barmaid - a woman in her late thirties whose golden hair fell in masses of curls around her shoulders, and whose small, silver-framed spectacles did nothing to hide the beauty of her azure-blue eyes.

Thus, most days after work he would sit at the Bar on a stool in that dim, smoke-coloured Inn of low ceilings talking to her when her time and duties allowed. He seldom spoke of himself, and if he did, it was only about his work in the fields nearby. Instead, he listened to the stories of her life as, sometimes, they chatted about the town-dwelling people who drifted in and out, sometimes sharing a knowing rural observation, and sometimes trying to guess their occupation, their background. He soon knew of her unhappiness; her wayward sons, and it did not take him long - two weeks in fact - to touch her hand one evening when, straight from work, he, her only customer, sat with his pint of brown liquid food, facing her. She smiled as he touched and briefly held her hand, and it was the next evening that she followed him to his room. Their love-making - their whole time together that evening in his room - was wordless, intense, unrestrained, and, afterwards, she hurriedly dressed to resume her duties in the now busy Bar below.

Their assignations were stolen, brief, always unrestrained and intense, and undertaken several times a week. Once, he tried to speak as they lay afterwards, joyously happy, but she pressed her finger to his lips. It was as if she did not wish to complicate her life further by speaking about things; or maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, Alun then was content to silently enjoy their liaison. Afterwards, he would sometimes go for a walk by the river, and when he sat at the Bar, later that, or the following, evening, they both could pretend they were only distant friends.

For weeks this pattern continued until one evening when he wandered out of the Inn to begin to walk across the almost empty car park to where a path led, through the old Hop field, down to the river.

"I want a word with you," the man said.

"Well, that's six, so far," Alun replied, smiling. He knew the man was Julie's husband.

Alun's reply seemed to anger the man who lunged at him. Then they were grappling with each other, backwards, forwards, until the low fence by the side of the Inn's car-park caused Alun to overbalance. He fell over to land on the hard ground with the man on top of him. He kicked at the man's groin, and they were up, on their feet, facing each other. Then they were locked together again, trying to push each other over. The killing rage he had not felt for many, many years came over Alun and it must have shown in his eyes, his bearing, in the spurt of strength, for the man suddenly let go of him, saying, "Hey, calm down!"

Alun looked at him, predator to prey, but then the laconic, civilized man was back, as quickly as the killer inside had resurfaced. The man extended his hand, and without a word said between them, Alun shook it. The man nodded; Alun nodded; they understood each other perfectly, and he watched the man walk back to his car.

The river brought him some inner peace, and he sat there, on the willow-strewn banks, as the sunny evening came with its cooling breeze, watching the fastly flowing clear water as it past over the broken rocks that made those shallow rapids of the restful sounds. Once, in the hours of his sitting, a Kingfisher sped past. He knew then that his new life was destroyed. One moment, more or less, and he would have been back, in the world of his youth and early manhood. It was as if the secrets of his past had been revealed and that everyone would view him as the person he then was, and not as he had struggled to become, what he wanted to be and believed he should be.

She was there, inside the dark warmth of the Inn, waiting, and he knew what she would say before she said it. It was over, and their passion, their simple shared delights, would become for her only a memory to be savoured in the desolate, unloved years that he felt lay ahead for her. "I do love him," she said in explanation.

"I know."

Restless, he could not settle back into the routine of his work and his isolated rural life, and it was only three days later that he made his decision to go. Once again he gathered up his few belongings - mostly clothes - and packed them into his large rucksack, and once again he set off, not knowing where he would go or what he might do.

Once, as he walked away from that Inn that overcast late Autumnal morning to walk toward the nearby town, he turned back to look, and she was there, by the small dark Oak porch. He did not wave, as she did not, and she did not run after him as part of him hoped.

Slowly, the Winter gave way to the warmth, the light, of Spring, and he toiled away in his new job, at a large plant Nursery in rural Herefordshire. It was a simple job, found after over a week of travel, and involved him in mostly moving pots of plants, four to eight at a time, although quite often he would spend hours or days doing whatever work was required: potting; trimming; weeding. Once again, he found lodgings - a room in a house in a village nearby - and once again he took to spending his evenings drinking in the village Inn, intending this time to be alone.

The Nursery occupied over fifty acres on a gently sloping hill near a small village, and, of the thirty or so workers, over twenty were women. Alun liked the percentage, and although he kept trying to keep his own company, it did not work. To avoid offense, he had sat, on old black plastic crates, with the others by the parked cars near the entrance to the Nursery for the morning break and lunch, and little by little, day after day, week after week, he found himself joining in the conversations of his fellow workers. One woman in particular came to interest him, for she smiled at him with such warmth, such understanding, he could only return her gift. Perhaps ten years younger than him, her grey-blonde hair was almost always in state of semi-disarray, although she had tried to tie part of it with a coloured band, and, as the weeks of his work there turned to a month, two months, he found himself looking at her more and more, and not only when, in the warmer weather, she shed her outer garments. She never wore a bra, and, as she worked or sat or walked - or rather strolled purposefully - her nipples often strained against the fabric of her always colourful, always thin, upper covering. He had seen a face like hers, once, on an ancient Grecian vase, and he could easily imagine her in those times - a forthright, joyful, enchanting, vibrant Spartan woman who shed charisma even as she walked.

So he listened while she talked, of her new older lover, of her house, her dog, how she had spent her weekends - every so often glancing at him, and smiling. Sometimes, he would join in these conversations, and give some wry observation, often at her expense, as she would return the favour. For weeks, this subtle aural fencing continued.

"You should listen to some decent music like JS Bach," he said one morning, after she had mentioned some modern music her lover had given her, just as their morning break was over.

He walked beside her, as everyone began to trudge back toward their work. "I'll bring you some CD's over, if you like," he said. "This week or weekend."

"OK. I'll cook something."

A time, day, was arranged, and he spent the long hours of the long days before then impatiently, expectantly, waiting.

Her house was a detached old cottage, set in a garden that had been neglected for years, and as soon as he entered the house he felt at peace. To others, the place might have seemed untidy, but to Alun it felt like a safe retreat from the strife of the world. He loved everything about it: the pile of letters, bills, papers on the old table near the Aga in the kitchen; the cupboards full of herbs, spices, sauces; the old postcards, photographs tacked or taped to walls; the sitting room with its log fire; crystals, stones, burnt-out joss sticks; neglected, large, potted plants; strewn memorabilia; tables of books, unread in months, years; the hessian sacking making-do as curtains; the large sofa covered by a blanket.

Their meal in the kitchen over, they went to sit by the log fire in her sitting room, talking about work; the world; her past and feelings, and, as she got up to pour more wine, he stood and embraced her. Then she was clinging onto him with a strength which surprised him. For over two hours they stood, sat, lay, holding and touching each other. He felt, kissed, her breasts, her nipples, her shoulders, her back, as her hand saught and found the zip on his trousers, her fingers stroking his penis. Then she was embracing him, crying, and they lay down on her sofa, her head resting on his chest. Her story of past betrayals brought more tears, and he softly stroked her hair, her face.

He loved her then in that moment and had to fight to keep that truth, his tears, from bursting forth: such love a torrent sweeping his calm of the past few months away. Gently, he wiped her tears away with his fingers, and they clung to each other for what seemed a long time.

"Do you want me to stay?" he asked, softy.

"Yes - no. You can't. You must think me a slut."

"No. No." Gently, he kissed her and looked at her then with such love that she softly said, "Please, don't look at me like that."

"I could move in - to help with your rent," he said, recalling one of her worries.

"I'd like that, very much," she said, spontaneously. Then: "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

"Will you think about it?"

"Yes," she smiled.

"Seriously?"

"Yes." And her smile was such that he felt then that one day they would be together, living, sharing, as he hoped and as he intuitively felt she hoped.

He longed to stay; to be with her; to complete the love-making they had started; to so begin a new loving friendship. But he wanted to do what was right, for her, and he slowly sat up to re-arrange his clothes which she, in her ardour, had loosed. She stood before him, and he briefly kissed her, daring not to look back as he left.

> These are the moments of an exquisite silence
> As we lie together on your sofa, holding, pressing
> Our bodies together
> As I, gently, stroke your face and hair
> And you kiss each finger of my hand.
>
> There is a fire of logs to warm us,
> As night descends:
>
> There are no words to confuse,
> No time, as we flow, together,
> As clouds on a warm Summer's day

Beneath a dome of blue.

There is a peace, here, which fills us
As if we are the world and all the beautiful, peaceful, things
Of the world.

Nearby, your two ginger cats sleep
Secure in the warmth of their world
As we are secured while we lie,
Wordless, feeling those subtle energies
Born from no barriers:
You are me as I am you,
In such exquisite moments.

But you belong to another
And it is against my will, my dreams, desires
That I leave
To walk the lonely miles under moonlight
To where a dreary lamp lights my empty room.

It was almost the same, at their next assignation, and the next. And the one two weeks after that. A meal, or some simple food, and many bottles of wine, shared. The talk of hours of her past, her dreams, her hopes. The music, playing. The embrace; kisses; the intimacy of touch. Once again he felt, kissed, her breasts, her nipples. Once again, they partially undressed each other, as many times they lay, body upon body, kissing, moving, writhing, in passion. But when he went to remove the final barrier of her lower underwear, she stopped him, and he - true to his honour - stopped. Once again, she wanted him to stay, to leave, and once again, he left, trying to do the decent, the right thing, what he assumed she wanted. "I am with someone else," she always said, and he - striving to be gallant - put her feelings before his own. Then, in the days that followed each such departure, there were letters, he wrote, explaining his feelings; poems, and with each passing day he sensed their connexion grow. Many were the times, at work, when she looked at him - or so he thought - with love.

But that night after leaving her house - not long before her departure for a holiday with her wealthy lover - he could not get to sleep, and even an hours-long walk under the stars, along country lanes, failed to tire him. The poem he wrote gave him some solace, and he could not restrain the love, the passion, which made him seal it an envelope and take it, an hour after Dawn, with him as he ran the miles of footpath and pavement to her house. There was so much he should have said; so much he wanted to say. But she was not there, and all he could do was push his poem through her letterbox and hope. A few hours later he telephoned. No one replied, and he left a message giving his telephone number, again, and, again, asking her to call.

For two days and nights he waited for that call, and even on the third day when he knew she had gone, for a month, to that Caribbean island with her lover, he waited, hoping. A week of waiting dimmed, but did not kill, his hope.

This week will become the month of loss,
This month a toil endured
As when the weary soil, drought-kept,
Waits, waiting, to bring forth flowering joy from seeds,
Like memory, sown from tears that are earth's rain,
My pain.

I know - and because I know the you
The years of sadness, doubt, self-loathing, hid and hides away,
I love the love that has no words I know:
Such love that is only the touch of you, the smile of you, the need of you, the scent of you,
The longing to be with you as if my love might redeem
The sorrows which made you hide
Still hiding a hope, within.

So much to say before you travel to stay a month away
With he who is your choice:
So much to miss I am, will be, lost
Needing now to run the miles to your house
Bearing such a poem as this.
This is all I have -
No house, car, money, prospects.
Only a love, a dream
Seen when I kissed your tears before you rested your head
On my shoulder that one night of belonging
When we knew, felt, touched, remembered, the essence.

But - three decades of love, thwarted - I am no longer naive enough to believe
You will be mine
And so I shall not, cannot, will not - must not - call upon you bearing
Such a poem as this.

He rushed along that footpath toward her house after that call, a week after her return. Almost in desperation, he had telephoned, leaving a message, and he was stunned when, only hours later, she telephoned him. Their first contact in over five weeks - five weeks of waiting for the call that never came.

"Shall I come over?" he asked.

"I suppose so, if you want."

"You read my poem?"

"Yes."

Half-running; half-walking; trying to be calm. Then, after what seemed a slow journey, he was there. He was awed, for a moment, by her beauty as she opened the door for him. She was so full of joy; radiating so much auric energy he had to embrace her, and she clung to him, for minutes, pressing her body closely into his. He loved the feel of her; the smell of her, the warmth of her.

They talked then, as her music played, of her experiences; the people met; places visited; her feelings. And after hours, many glasses of wine drunk, he held her hand as they sat close together on her sofa. Then they were holding each other, so tight, so strong, it hurt. And kissing, tongue to tongue; her hands stroking his back, chest, hair; his - her arms, breasts, face, hair.

She playfully, but painfully, bit his chest, his shoulder, and then his hand was undoing the zip of her jeans, his fingers creeping inside to feel her warmth, her dampness. But she pulled away, to stand in the middle of the room while her music played, as it had played, hour upon hour for nearly five hours.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked. And she shook her head, before briefly embracing him.

They talked again, then, sitting on the floor, close together. Ten minutes, fifteen, thirty.

"I love you," he said

"Don't say that."

"I must say it. I have never loved anyone as I love you and if I don't say it to you, face to face, I will forever regret not saying it."

Then they were holding each other; touching; kissing, and she did not resist as his hands stroked her breasts; as he kissed her nipples. For a long time, they lay together until she stood to re-button her blouse and re-fasten the zip on her jeans.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked again and again she shook her head.

"Promise you won't do anything?" she said.

"Yes, I promise," he replied, feeling, sensing, what was left unspoken.

In her room, she undressed in the dark. Then they were side by side in her bed, until he turned to kiss her and fondle her breasts. She held him then, and he was soon inside her, gently moving, touching, saying his words of love.

For over an hour they were together in that lover's embrace, gently, passionately, gently, passionately. "I want you to love me; I want you to love me," she repeated as he, she, they, gently moved in their intimate embrace. "Beautiful, wonderful. This is so beautiful," she said. "I love you for this..."

He cried, then, and she held him, strongly, and brushed away his tears with a loving gentleness.

Sleep came, later, and he awoke, still holding her, and as he touched her she, too, awoke. But there was no smile when she turned to look at him, and he knew she had returned to be with herself, inside, striving to keep him out. He hid his feelings, as he had done, once, several times, at concerts, as when that evening he sat alone among a crowd in a Cathedral listening to the beauty of Bach whose *Erbame Dich* placed him between the past - his own, the world - and the future, feeling as he did in that emotive, numinous, moment the burden of sadness, of understanding, of grief, of five thousand years of human suffering and tragedy. Then, at that concert, he had sat, slightly shaking, as silent tears he could not control descended from his eyes to wet his cheeks, his beard.

This time, he did not cry, his mask a smile. He dressed to leave her with her thoughts and feelings as the warm air of that early sunny May morning entered the room through the small open window partly hidden as that dusty window was by thin sun-faded curtains. He stood in her kitchen, waiting, watching, - without feeling or thought - the tall, growing greening grass of her garden. And when she did descend down her stairs to share the kitchen space with him, she brushed aside his attempt to touch her hand, hold her. "Don't," she said, turning away. "It was a mistake..."

"No, it wasn't," he protested. "It was what you needed in terms of love, passion, gentleness, empathy, understanding."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? You are afraid, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You know it's true. We have a connexion."

"Maybe. I don't know."

"I love you."

"It won't work."

"It can. We are so similar, you and I. I do understand you."

"I know."

"You are special."

She shook her head, and he was left to stand there, waiting, hoping.

"You should go..." she said. "Please."

"Yes." he moved toward her, but she turned away, and opened the door to walk slowly, reluctantly, and like an old man bent by sadness and grief, out into the sunlight dappled by the trees of her garden.

It was like the moments they had shared had never happened. As if all the things she had said, that night, previous nights, had never been said. He did not understand. Was she was pretending - even to herself, perhaps - that they were just friends? His long letters of love, of hope - revealing his feelings, his dreams - his telephone calls, and his attempts to talk with her, for a few snatched moments, at work, seemed only to annoy her, until, only three days after that shared night, she shouted at him as he, once again, tried to talk as she walked toward her car at the end of that day's work.

"You're embarrassing me!" she almost shouted.

"Can we talk, please," he asked.

"No. There is nothing to talk about."

"Can't we talk - to sort things out."

"There is nothing to sort out."

"I want a proper relationship, with you..."

"Impossible."

"I love you."

"I don't love you. Leave me alone!"

He could see she was angry. "If that's what you want," he said, softly.

"Yes!" And she rushed away, leaving him standing there feeling like a childish fool, her words - "Leave me alone!" - echoing in his head.

That evening - as the music of Bach played while outside, in the real world beyond his, the hot Sun of early June seemed to be playing hide-and-seek with the white Summer cumulus clouds that were wind-drifted across the dome of English-sky-blue - he knew what he must do. No more the dreams; no more the hopes. He would put them all away, as a fastidious office clerk might file them, safely, securely, for some future time of un-emotive inspection or recall.

So he would be alone, for the rest of his life, his empathy, his understanding, hidden. For what had his great struggle of inner transformation achieved? For where had his sensitivity - born from that struggle - got him? What had it brought except the sadness of a sorrowful longing? Of women lost. Had it brought

him the woman he had loved, loved more than anyone he had ever loved, and still loved? No, a hundred times no. Could her forget her? Should he forget her and the exquisite moments they had shared, the closeness; the empathy; the understanding; the passion? No, he could not forget what he knew, felt, understood, might have been had she not been so afraid of herself, and him.

No woman, he felt then, could ever replace her; ever come close to her: her - the hope of his thirty and more years of adult life. For over three months, he had opened himself, for her, to her, even more than hinting at some of the deeds of his past. Three months of little sleep, of love's fever; of poems, letters, written; of words spoken in hope; of snatched meals; of long walks, weekends, evening, nights; longer, furious, cycle rides up steep hills on his newly purchased cycle; of bending iron bars with his bare hands; of stupidly, dangerously, freely, climbing the wet rocks of craggy outcrops; of evenings sat, alone, in some Inn, drinking, to stagger back to his bed in the hope of at least some hours of restful sleep. Three months of struggling to contain his burgeoning passion.

"I, we, have touched the essence... And I cannot ever be the same, again."

Three months since he had first held her and touched her intimately; three months of returned embraces, intimacy, hopes, dreams; three months during which they had shared so many hours, so many feelings, together.

He tried to place his own deep feelings for her in the context of human life, trying to convince himself that such a sharing as he felt and knew to be possible - and which he and she so ardently desired - were not the only reason for living, for he knew that if he did not do this, he would have to die, such was the sadness of his loss. For days, he planned where and how he might die - a mountain, climbed; a trek into the Western Desert to lie down and sleep; a ferry to Iceland where at night he might slip over the side into the darkness of the sea..... And, days of painful thought and of dire feelings later, he did - as a tied Jury swayed momentarily by one elegant speech - persuade himself to live, to do something supra-personal to bring some meaning beyond a woman to his life. Only he did not know, then, what this something might, or could, or should, be. He could not paint, he could not compose music - how he wished he could! But as he searched, days after day, for meanings, he remembered how she had said that he was embarrassing her when he all he desired was to talk, to explain, to share again his dreams, his hopes, his love: to draw her out again, and bring - be - a strength, a joy, to her life. Was he so unimportant to her that she placed what others thought of her before him? Did he mean so little that his own feelings were irrelevant to her? Had been wrong, and misunderstood her, her motives? No, he could not believe that, given all she had said, hour after hour, week upon week.

But he remembered: "Leave me alone... It was a mistake... There is nothing to sort out."

Thus it was that he, a man changed and aged by deeds of war, by too many killings, saught to began his life, yet again. He would shuffle along the lane to his day of work, and, while there, keep his mask in place; sometimes laughing; sometimes smiling, talking, with others, of mundane things, worldly things. And, work over, he would return to the Inn, to beer, or to his room, to his walks, his music, trying to convince himself that when they did meet again - as they must - he would be strong, honourable, respectful of her decision, pleased for her, and not show his sadness, his grief, his love.

All these things worked; while she was not there. But there came that fateful destined dreaded day when he saw her, there. For over three weeks he had skillfully avoided her at work; for a week, she had been away, ill, and he had had to master all his strength to avoid telephoning her, calling upon her, worried as he was.

But it seemed alright. She was pleased to see him, and they talked, affably and for ten minutes, of how she felt, what she was doing. About how she had left her older lover, at last. About her desire to learn some new skill to channel her feelings. And he was pleased when he went to resume his own work that warm Sunny day. Pleased. Happy. So pleased he even started singing to himself as he worked, faster than normal. Then, hours later, she was there, come to find him, to ask some question about work. It was good,

he felt, standing there, with her, and he asked - as she smiled - if they might meet after work.

"Yes, why not," she said.

"When?"

"Later this week?"

"Yes."

She turned to leave then, and as she walked away and the Sun warmed him, she turned to say: "It doesn't mean anything, meeting."

The next day, they met again, she seeking him out about a problem to do with weeds, and he was pleased to be with her.

"My offer is still open, you know, about moving in to help with your rent."

"I know, but I don't trust you."

He winced. "That's not a very nice thing to say." And he thought - no, she does no trust herself, with me. He turned to leave, hurt, upset, hoping for some words of warmth from her, but she blithely smiled and said, "See you later!"

Next day, she stopped him as he passed on his tractor. She looked beautiful in the warm morning Sun in her shorts, her hair in its usual state of semi-disarray, her nipples straining against the thin fabric of her purple short-sleeved top.

"How are you?" he asked, desperately wanting to talk with her, alone. For nearly two months he had waited, patient, hoping.

"Fine. I'm definitely going to learn to paint," she said.

"Good. That is what you need to do, focus on something other than people. Use those gifts you have."

She smiled at him, and he felt again how special she was, how beautiful. "He's definitely having the Barn," she replied.

"Your painter friend?"

"Yes. He's moving in with me, today..."

Alun was shocked. So shocked, he could not speak and all he could do was walk away, back to his tractor, to drive off. For over two hours he listened to his tape of Arabic music while he worked: Samira Said, Fairuz, Souad Massi... But it did not help, and he became so angry that he stood behind his trailer to lift it, several times, up off from the ground. It was then he realized he still loved her, deeply, passionately; that his pretence had been pretence; that he was jealous of her friend. He was calm then, with this realization, resolving - as he had done before - to bury his feelings, deeper this time, to be the good friend he knew she needed.

A day later, he passed her while she squatted weeding with her young, student, helpers.

"Can I have a word?" he happily asked, and she smiled in reply and followed him. They stood, yards away from the others. "When are we meeting?" he asked.

"Well, I did hope it was would be this week, but it will have to be next week now, or later."

"I knew you would do that," he said, painfully hurt.

"How dare you talk to me like that!" she replied, angry. "I've got enough to deal with."

Suddenly, he too was annoyed. "Do I mean so little to you," he blurted out, "that you cannot even be bothered to meet with me to talk? For three months - except for three days - I've put your feelings before mine. Not once in the past six weeks have you contacted me."

She walked away from him, then, even more angry, and he was left to return to his tractor, no longer annoyed, but deeply dismayed. He kept passing her, that day, and each time she turned away, or avoided him, until he could bear it no longer. He wanted to apologize; to try and make things better. To remove the sadness and pain that came with her indifference to him.

"Can we talk," he asked.

"No," she said, anger in her voice.

"We can't leave it like this."

"Go away. Just go away!" she shouted.

"Please..."

"Go away!"

He did, bent by sadness, and that night - tormented by his failure to control himself, again, for her sake - he could only sleep after several glasses of Port. Even then, he awoke after only a few hours of broken sleep, spending the long hours until it was time to prepare himself for another day of work by listening to the music of Bach. How, how, he kept repeating to himself, had it all gone so wrong? How? There was so much promise there; so many feelings, hopes, dreams, desires, that they shared. So much similar sad experiences they had encountered in their lives. So much longing to be with someone who understood; who felt as they, alone, did. So much depth of physical passion, shared. How had it all gone so wrong? He could only blame himself, for he felt he could not have been wrong about her - about her empathy; her understanding; her sadness; her dreams; her need for a gentle love.

Next day, instead of eating the lunch sandwiches he did not want, he sat on his trailer, by the large greenhouse at one end of the Nursery, to write a letter to a friend.

> I remember a story. It is the story - the sad story - of a young woman I knew and whom I briefly nursed in those days, long ago now, when my then still early life served a different and perchance more noble purpose. Before I became involved in those deeds which changed my life.... She was on the Ward where I then worked, recovering from a routine operation and, as I changed her bloodied dressing one warm day, we fell to talking as people do. She had been reading *Howards End* - then a favourite book of mine - and it was not long before we discovered a mutual love of Mozart. Whenever time, my duties, permitted, we talked - as that evening, some days later, after my shift had ended. We talked for hours, as late afternoon turned to evening
>
> Why she confided in me - almost a stranger - I did not know. But she showed me a letter she had written to her lover, a letter she feared to send. She wrote of her love, her hopes, her feelings, as she spoke to me of her past - the betrayals; the manipulation; the self-doubt; the suicide attempt, only months ago. "People can be so cruel," I remember she had said, as I remember that she seemed to me, then, as now, a delicate, gentle, life - a rather shy, awkward, innocent girl in a young woman's body, so taken advantage of by others, by men. I remember how her eyes brightened when she spoke of Mozart; of how she happily showed me photographs of a family trip to Austria; and revealed the pressed Edelweiss she kept as a memento. I remember how she almost cried as she spoke of how her lover - how several others - had said she should "grow up".
>
> I was there when she left, clutching her little unfashionable bag full of the things people need for a stay in hospital. I was there, by the swing-doors which gave entrance to the Ward. I was there

hoping that someone would come to meet her; to hold her. But no one did. I was there, sensing that she wanted me to do something, to say something: sensing that she herself was too shy to do, say, what she felt, needed. I was there, wanting to hold her, wanting to ask for her address; for her telephone number - but there was something, something, which held me back. It was my honour; for I had pledged my loyalty to the woman I then loved.

Not long after, I learnt that my favourite patient was dead. She had killed herself. Was this, I thought, the price of my honour? Could I have done more? I should have done more. For weeks afterwards, her death haunted me. I felt such a failure, as a Nurse, as a human being. It was such a waste of a beautiful life. We two human beings had made a connexion - a deep connexion. We two, who perhaps felt too much; who felt what others felt, and who often retreated into ourselves because the words of others, their feelings, even sometimes the way they looked at us, could wound us. I knew we two had shared something human, special, just as I knew that she was a better human being than those who derided her, who demanded she "grow up". Grow up - and become like them? Insensitive; forgetful of, or never having known, the pure innocent joy of those wondrous, civilized moments such as being captivated by a beautiful, sublime piece of music heard for the first time, bringing tears. Become like them? - laughing at the treasured keepsake? Become like them? - cheating; scheming; lying to impress.

All she needed was a simple, uncomplicated, giving, gentle, love. Such a waste of a beautiful life. Such a regret, for me, in me. And now my own life has returned to the feelings of that time, that place, filled as they were then by that beautiful, brief, life. For years, for many, many years - too many years - I forgot her; forgot the feelings engendered then; the understanding given by her, through her. I tried in those long years to "grow up"; to behave, act, scheme, like others. But there is no need to "grow up", here, in this my quiet, special, rural place where Nature lives. I can be myself, again, as I was, once, with her. Perhaps she, my favourite patient, is here - or somewhere nearby. I would like to believe so. Perhaps she lives as long as I, someone, remembers her.

How easily I, we, forget. But I shall strive to never forget her, again.....

As for she whom I loved, here, I was wrong; not restrained enough. Too emotive in my love. I have no excuses, having unintentionally hurt through my persistence of love, my naive hope, a person whom I loved. Thus do I know I am not as enlightened as I wanted and want to believe. With her, I could be the person I once was; the person I lost, but now, after much struggle, have become again. And with her loss, what am I? My love was a gift, created from the years of sadness, and yet its rejection can be, should be, the strange genesis of growth. Thus does the slow, painful, learning of this man - dwarfed by tree, sky, centuries, Sun - flow on. To where?

He desperately wanted to make things right between them, but for a week, she avoided him, and each time he saw her he felt ashamed. He had revealed himself, again - and how could she, of all people, turn away from him, not understand him? She, of all people, knew how sensitive he was. Several times, in his distress, his pain, he felt tears about to burst forth as they did whenever he heard certain of Bach's music: for to be near her, their connexion severed, was tormenting, especially when - as several times - he worked so near her he could hear her talk, hear her laugh. Thus, all he could do was plan to leave: his work; the new life he had with such sadness begun. He would be alone, however hard it was, for alone he could never hurt anyone ever again, he would never have to face the utter humiliation he felt, now. He would be alone, having finally forsaken his dream, his hope, of somehow sharing his life. He would be alone, for the rest of his life, a fitting penance for the selfish and deadly deeds of his past, for his recent failure to control the deep passion of his love.

Only twice did he feel otherwise, for he remembered the life-enhancing ecstasy that the years of his past deeds, his past assignments, had brought - days, months, years when he had been a harmony of body, mind, soul because through focused action, through his belief in his mission, himself, he had existed, or so

it seemed then, on a higher level of existence, striving toward the gods. Thus, he could begin again; using the skills he had used to such advantage then. Begin again - with no problems, no thoughts, that deeds, action, could not overcome.

But - but it would not work, he knew, because he had come too far, since then. He was indeed a different person, someone who could no longer harm others, whatever the non-personal excuse. His very understanding, the empathy, the compassion, acquired through the anguish of understanding the deeds of his past, prevented him. Was this loss, this inability, in itself, sad? Or a necessary part of the evolution that had transformed him? He did not really know, and in truth he did not care.

So he began his plans to once again live as a wanderer, his home his tent. He would never, under any circumstances, reveal himself to anyone ever again. "People can be so cruel..." he remembered as, in his rented room, he began to pack the few clothes he would take for this new and final stage of his life. It was either the life of a wanderer, or death. Maybe it would come to that - planning again the best way to die. But for now, he felt he knew what he must do - be alone; bereft of possessions, human company, feelings of love; bereft of dreams, hope. Just live, alone, simply, in the rural England he loved, savouring the peaceful joy of Nature; perhaps transmuting some of the quiet stillness he hoped he would feel into the words of some poem, the gift of his life.

Outside, in the village, in the cities and towns, people would be alive: laughing, loving; enjoying, as he assumed in a rather self-centered way that she would be laughing, loving, enjoying, never even for one moment thinking about him, concerned about him. And as if in resonance to his gloomy thoughts of self-absorption, the dark cloudy sky began to pour down torrents of rain which beat upon the dusty window of his airless room.

Only a few miles away she was lying on her sofa in that room of their many trysts, having in her worry and guilt about herself, and him, drunk herself into an alcoholic sleep. But he did not know this, as he did not know that she had been spreading untrue rumours about him, saying to her colleagues at work how he had harassed her. And so he, in his naivety, let one possible future pass him by, while retaining as he did vague, romantic, notions about her.